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A-ONE #0925   06/22/07

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->From the Editor's Keyboard   "Saying it like it is!"
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""

Hey, it's officially summer - YEA! Yeah, I know it's only a date on the
calendar, but it's as much a psychological thing as anything else. It's
a great time of year, and I enjoy it. It's like being rejuvenated due to
the nice weather.

I was going to repeat our offer to you readers to write about your Atari
experiences, or whatever favorite Atari memory you might have, but I'm not
going to do that this week. The offer stands. So instead, I'm going to
let you all off the hook and end this editorial quickly. I'm going to
revel in two straight days of golfing, with a third over the weekend.
Life is good, I guess.

Until next time...

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        Atari Collection Fails To Sell, Reserve Price Not Met

Cort Allen's treasure trove of 2,200 Atari historical documents, drawings
and diagrams is still his.

The 60-year-old Pleasanton resident was auctioning off his massive
collection, which received national media attention, at Sotheby's New York
on Thursday.

The pre-auction estimate for this piece of the video game pioneer's
history was $150,000 to $250,000, but the lot did not sell. There were
several bidders, but the bidding did not reach the undisclosed reserve
price set by the owner.

Allen, a semiconductor design consultant, said he is now reviewing his
options to see what to do next with the collection.

"I don't know where we're going right now," Allen said Thursday. He added
he could sell off the massive collection in parts, or possibly get in
contact with individuals that did bid at the Sotheby's auction in New
York.

Allen said he has received tons of e-mails from Atari fans inquiring about the collection.

Allen stumbled onto the treasure trove of gaming goodness when he was looking for used furniture for his new company in the mid-1980s. He stopped by a fire sale of old Atari office equipment and found 40 cabinets full of the original artwork for the game cartridges and the original manual write-ups - including drafts for a manual for the game "Robotron 2084," classic artwork from "Dig Dug" and early images of such characters such as Mario and Donkey Kong, for Atari versions of the classic Nintendo games.

The cabinets were being sold for $2 each, and the contents were being emptied into the trash by sale employees when Allen stopped by. and offered on the spot to buy all the cabinets, contents an all.

Since that time, Allen said he has moved the 350 pounds of video game history around his house - from closet, to shelves to garage - all much to his wife's chagrin.

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                    PEOPLE ARE TALKING
                   compiled by Joe Mirando
                      joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, here we are again, and again you're going to hear me say that there aren't a lot of messages on the UseNet, but that we're going to give it a shot anyway.

But before we get to the messages, I want to ask you folks' opinion on something...

Y'see, I write this column (and particularly the 'intro' portion) without regard to anything else that's going on. Poor Dana, on the other hand, will often carefully craft his editorial only to find that I've already covered whatever topic it happened to be. He will then proceed to re-write his editorial.

Well I, for one, say "the heck with it... let it stand as-is". Even though we usually agree (except, of course, for yard work), I've always thought that there was room for both of us to voice our opinions on things, whether it's the brat pack or politics, there's always room for both our opinions... even if it's the same opinion.

For one thing, Dana's smarter and more talented than I am, and even if our opinions and reasoning are the same, I'll often say, "damn, I wish I had thought of that turn-of-phrase", or "I wish I'd put it that way". And let's face it folks, there's no such thing as too much information. When one or the other of us fail to reach a particular portion of our readers, the other one will often succeed.

So if you agree with me, email Dana and/or myself... oh heck, write to us regardless of whether you agree with me or not. Let us know what

your opinion is.

As a matter of fact, while we're on the subject of writing, why not
write to us about your ST, TT, Falcon030 or Portfolio? What do you use
it for, what would you LIKE to be able to use it for, or what do you
miss most about the good ol' days? We're always looking for
submissions, and I'm sure the rest of our readership would appreciate a
break from my prattle. [grin]

Oh! One other thing. Someone wrote to ask me about some of the URLs I
often include in this column. They wanted to know why and how I change
the URLs to something completely different and have the link
'magically' come out right.

Well, first the "why".
Sometimes, URLs are so long that they cause problems both in my text
editor (I do all my writing in a simple ASCII editor instead of one of
those fancy word processing apps) and in Dana's.

There was one time, before we realized what was causing the problem,
that I missed two or three issues in a row because the column I
submitted totally confused/screwed up the finished product.

A quick email or call from Dana, and we decided to excise the whole
column instead of trying to figure out why text was all of a sudden
disappearing or totally mangled. It turned out that extreme length (as
in some very long URLs) gave our apps fits.

So now, when I want to include a very long (longer than 72 characters)
URL, I'll go to a website called TinyURL (http://www.tinyurl.com) and
let it convert the long stream of characters into a short one that fits
within the margins that we've set for ourselves. It really works quite
well, and solves all of our problems.

Unless I forget (I don't think I've forgotten it yet, but I may have), I
try to indicate that I've converted the URL into one of these by adding
something like "[URL modified by Editor]" so that you'll know that it's
okay to use the link. After all, what good is a URL if it destroys the
rest of the column, right?

Well, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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'Sam F' asks about a DSP card:

"Is this card [the Deese DSP] still being worked on, or has it gone by
the wayside?"

Carey Christenson tells Sam:

"I am very curious about this card as well. I have not heard anything
from the developer. I even put myself down as a possible tester when a
workable prototype was available. Been so long I might have to write
the guy again and see what is up. I thought OzK was one of them working
on the software end of it. Might have just been the drivers not sure.

Again been a long while. Hope we hear some good news!"

Jean-Luc Ceccoli tells Carey and Sam:

"Have a look at http://www.czuba-tech.com/DEESSE/english/welcome.htm "

'Charles' asks about the first programming language I learned... or
tried to:

"Hi all, I have recently decided that GFA was not a sufficient language
to program with and have since then made a change to pascal...good
grief what a tangled mess!!!!!!! , but.......

If any one is willing ,who reads this, and can offer advice in any way
shape or form .... towards a practical approach to pascal programming
on the atari , i will gladly accept..."

Rod Smith tells Charlie:

"Back in 1986 or 1987, I bought Personal Pascal from OSS for my Atari
520ST and made heavy use of it for several years. At the time I found
it quite adequate, but I'm not sure how it stacks up today against
other Pascal compilers for the ST. One oddity about it is that it
includes GEM interfaces, but it modified and simplified the standard
GEM interfaces.

Thus, if you learn GEM programming via Personal Pascal, you'll have to
re-learn it if you subsequently change to another language. Personal
Pascal's GEM interfaces are odd in that they let you build dialog boxes,
menus, etc., without using a resource editor, which is a requirement of
most other ST languages. If you've got a separate resource editor, you
can still use it; but if not you'll have to code dialog boxes, etc., by
hand in the main program.

For learning Pascal generally (particularly an older one like Personal
Pascal), I can heartily recommend the book _Oh! Pascal!, 2nd Edition_
(1985) by Doug Cooper and Michael Clancy (ISBN 0-393-95445-5). Checking
Amazon.com, it seems that the book is long out of print and hasn't been
updated in a while, but it's extremely well-written. Amazon has links to
used copies for as little as $0.01 (plus $3.99 shipping!).

Others have suggested bypassing Pascal in favor of another language,
such as C. There's something to be said for this, particularly if you
want to learn something that'll translate into marketable job skills.
IMHO, Pascal's main limitation is in its memory handling -- or at
least, that was the case ~20 years ago. (I've not programmed in Pascal
in over a decade.) C gives you much more flexibility on that score. On
the other hand, C is also a much "looser" language (not just in memory
handling), which means it's much easier to dig yourself a deep, dark,
bug-filled hole in C than in Pascal. If you're a relative programming
novice, starting with Pascal will let you write working programs with
less pain and learn good programming techniques in the process; but if
you've been programming for a while and understand the basics of things
like functions, control loops, recursion, memory management, etc., C
will give you more power. Another factor: There are programming trends
and techniques that change over time. Pascal and C both predate some
important modern programming techniques, such as object-oriented (OO)

programming, so you won't learn OO programming with Pascal. Many modern
languages, such as C++, are OO languages. (C++ is an extension of C, so
if you learn C, learning C++ becomes easier.)"

Guillaume Tello adds:

"The only pascal I saw was the Pure Pascal, long time ago! It's a very
old one, 20 years ago it could look as a serious development system,
but now, it's obsolete.

The editor used to reserve 80 bytes for each line, whatever was typed
in. So this limited the size of the edited program!

But, if anyone else has 'newer news'..."

Charlie replies:

"I surely accept this input guys... especially rod... so far pascal
isn't that bad and most commands are similar to that of which I carry
up from basic.

But I should remain true to my objective and that is to learn and
obtain knowledge of the language I have chosen, basic was good to
learn program flow , command words along with identification of
variables,and ,strings ....

Now pascal has shows areas of libraries, stronger program flow
methods ...quicker procedure... I guess I'd like to enjoy a steady
learning pace... and not jump right in the pointer filled landscape of
'c'.

A little about myself: I picked up programming four or five years ago
so I am relatively new!!!! Having no idea of a symbol from a pointer
from a variable, sorting this shuffled mess has been quite a task.
Thanks for expressing enough interest to guide me past the 'nooks' and
'crannies' of programming ...i will eventually progress , even if it's
years ahead."

Jo Even Skarstein adds:

"I used to program quite a bit in Pascal at university. At that time I
only had my Falcon and did a lot of programming using High Speed
Pascal. This is a fairly good Turbo Pascal clone, it even has BGI
libraries. It also has GEM and AES libraries, so you can develop GEM
applications if you want. Unline Pure Pascal (which I don't have any
experience with) it doesn't support the OO extensions in later versions
of Turbo Pascal."

'Coda' adds:

"I would say 'forget Pascal'. It was designed as a tool to teach
programming, hence the reason why it is (or was) so present in schools
and uni's. Of course there were some great app's written in Pascal,
just as in any language, but you are much better off learning C.

That's of course if you really don't want to stick with GFA, which is

actually a quite flexible and powerful language.

If you want to program C on the Atari, I think there are these choices today:

1. Hisoft C. Interpreted C, but compiler is available. Obsolete, and no support anywhere, AFAIK. I don't know anyone using this today.

2. Lattice C. (Also by hisoft). Professional and almost complete C compiler with some C++ syntax. Obsolete, no support, but fairly comprehensive manuals. Some Atari programmers still use it (me included) so answers to tricky problems can still be found (the archive of the CSASP newsgroup is useful). Can sometimes be found for sale on ebay, and some Atari vendors may still sell it.

3. Pure C. Unless you speak German, there is no documentation, apart from a small English introduction and basic usage guide. Quite a few Atari programmers still use Pure C though. I think HDDriver is written in Pure C. There are good libraries available for Pure C (Godlib springs to mind).

4. Gnu C/C++. You need a MiNT installation to use this, and some knowledge of how to work in a Unix environment. Quite a few developers use this package, a lot of dev is done with GNU C, not only on Atari, but also on every unix platform in the world, and others (its even available for windows, but the unix version can still build windows binaries!). If you want future compatibility, or to port code from other platforms this is the one to go for. Atari libraries are available."

Guillaume Tello tells Coda:

"I use it [GNU C/C++] with a single TOS and the GNU Shell written by Olivier Landemarre."

Coda replies:

"Nice. Didn't know about that."

'Ryan' asks about the power cable for his Mega STE's floppy drive:

"Hi everyone. I posted this question to this newsgroup 6 months ago and didn't get a good response, and then I forgot about the Atari for awhile, but now I'm getting back into it -- just got a synthesizer again and would like to read my songs off my floppies. So I'd appreciate some help from a fellow MEGA STE owner.

I disconnected the floppy drive's power cable, without realizing that it would physically reconnect to the drive in either orientation. Now I want to plug it back in but don't want to fry the drive by plugging it in wrong. So the question is: which way should it be plugged in?

http://ryandesign.com/tmp/atari-mega-ste-floppy-drive-power-cable.jpg "

David Wade tells Ryan:

"I think you will find it only fits one way. The "plug" on the drive has
a plastic 'tongue' along one side of the pins. The "socket" on the end
of the cable usually has a recess on one side that matches the tongue. I
am pretty sure if you try the wrong way it just won't go."

Mark Bedingfield tells David:

"Those particular plugs are the same as a PC's cd audio cable and have
no specific orientation. Cheap and nasty way of doing it, very easy to
plug in backwards. If it is plugged in backwards it can be quite bad as
it would be feeding 12v into a 5v rail. Anyway, B is the right way."

Ryan tells Mark:

"Thanks for your reply, Mark. That was exactly my concern! I didn't want
to fry it since I have no replacement. I reassembled it with the cable
plugged in the way you indicated, and it worked.

For the archives: with the Atari MEGA STE opened up and its top flipped
upside-down, the correct way to attach the floppy drive power cable is
with the yellow wire to the right, the red wire to the left.

Dave, I also now see what you meant about the plastic "tongue" on the
plug fitting in to a matching recess on the socket. Well, on my cable
they don't seem to actually fit together much, but I can see how they're
probably supposed to do that.

Thanks again, everyone. Now my Atari is purring along prettily again."

Well folks, on that note we'll stop for the week. Tune in again next
week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are
saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer Shi
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   """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Added Heatsinks May Revive Broken Xbox 360s
                                     Britain Bans Sales of 'Manhunt 2' Game
                                     And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
   """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

'Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer' Ships

2K, a publishing label of Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., announced that Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer, a new third-person action video game featuring Marvel Entertainment's legendary super-powered foursome, is now available. Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer was developed by 2K's Visual Concepts studio for PlayStation 3 computer entertainment system and Xbox 360 video game and entertainment system from Microsoft. 7 Studios developed the title for PlayStation2 computer entertainment system, Nintendo's Wii and Nintendo DS.

Based on both the popular comic book series and the film FANTASTIC FOUR: RISE OF THE SILVER SURFER, which Twentieth Century Fox released June 15, 2K's video game includes exclusive plot elements that complement the film and a host of classic Marvel comics' story elements. In the game and the film, the Fantastic Four face their greatest challenge yet as the enigmatic, intergalactic herald, the Silver Surfer, comes to Earth to unleash destruction. As the Silver Surfer races around the globe wreaking havoc, the team must unravel the mystery of the Silver Surfer and confront the surprising return of their mortal enemy, Dr. Doom.

"The Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer video game capitalizes on the capabilities of next generation platforms to bring fun new features to the franchise, such as seamless four player co-op and the radically unique Fusion Attacks," said Christoph Hartmann, President of 2K.

Game features:

* Take on the role of any member of the Fantastic Four team and switch
  characters at any time. Each member has unique special abilities that will
  help the team get through different situations.
* Unite and fight! Battle in four player co-op with easy pick-up-and-play
  ability.
* Combine super powers for devastating team attacks with the new Fusion
  Attack System
* Loads of unlockable features including alternate Fantastic Four
  costumes, historical comic covers, concept art and more!
* Face enemies from the Fantastic Four universe including Red Ghost,
  Terrax and Super Skrull.
* Enhance your super powers: use the Wii Remote on the Wii and the
  SIXAXIS controller on the PlayStation 3 for mega boost attacks.

"With Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer, 2K is giving fans of the comic book series and movie franchise a great opportunity to continue the exciting Super Hero experience," said Justin Lambros, Vice President of Interactive at Marvel Entertainment, Inc. "Gamers can relive the best moments from the film and also play through additional storylines exclusive to the game."

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer is now available and is rated "T" for Teen for PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 2 systems, Xbox 360 and Wii. The DS version of the game is rated "E10+" for Everyone 10 and older.

For more information, visit the Fantastic Four website at:

http://www.2kgames.com/riseofthesilversurfer.

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer Ships For Playstation 3, Xbox 360, Playstation 2, and Wii

Added Heatsinks May Revive Broken Xbox 360s

Certainly, most savvy 360 owners already know that three red lights on the front of their console means certain unwanted death. A number of users have already undergone the painful ordeal of seeing their 360 units die, but some of them have also witnessed their machines come back to life due to the efforts of Microsoft's customer service department. The more curious lot of these Xbox 360 owners have opened up their repaired consoles to see what exactly has been fixed, and have discovered a new heatsink in their machine.

Reports indicate that this extra heatsink is installed by Microsoft to provide additional cooling for the Xenos GPU, leading some to ponder what exactly is wrong with consoles that are affected by the "red ring of death". Some believe X-shaped clamps are at fault, while others blame an abundance of thermal paste (although others, curiously enough, believe that there is not enough thermal paste).

Either way, the problem of overheating GPUs is still a problem that looms over the head of Microsoft's hardware division. Both the company, as well as serviced 360 owners hope that this additional heatsink will make the red ring of death a thing of the past. However, it is unknown at this time whether newly manufactured Xbox 360's contain this second heatsink or if it is simply something that Microsoft installs only if the console has died.

Interested readers can head over to TeamXbox for more internal pictures of this new heatsink that has found its way into repaired 360 units.

Britain Bans Sales of 'Manhunt 2' Game

An upcoming video game from the maker of the "Grand Theft Auto" series came under fire Tuesday in the United States and Britain, where the government's ratings board banned sales for what it called an "unremitting bleakness and callousness of tone."

Rockstar Games' "Manhunt 2" was scheduled for a July 10 release on Nintendo Co.'s Wii and Sony Corp.'s PlayStation 2 consoles.

Players of "Manhunt 2" assume the role of an escaped mental institution patient who goes on a killing spree as he fights his way to freedom. It includes special death moves players can perform by moving the Wii's wireless, motion-sensitive controller at just the right moment.

The British Board of Film Classification last banned a game in 1997, when it barred the sale of "Carmageddon," in which players rack up points by driving vehicles over pedestrians.

In a statement, BBFC director David Cooke said the board was unable to approve the game because it was "distinguishable from recent high-end video games by its unremitting bleakness and callousness of tone in an

overall game context which constantly encourages visceral killing with exceptionally little alleviation or distancing."

Rockstar spokesman Rodney Walker said "Manhunt 2" was meant to be a horror game, something akin to gory films like "Saw."

He called the BBFC's decision a form of censorship because the public would never get to decide for itself.

"People think of video games as a kids' medium but the fans are so diverse and the games are diverse," he said. "When you ban a game, you're putting a limit on what sort of creative choices people can make."

But Cooke insisted that the game would "involve a range of unjustifiable harm risks to both adults and minors."

Rockstar and its parent company, Take-Two Interactive Software Inc., have six weeks to appeal. Rockstar said it will decide over the next few days whether to do so.

In the United States, meanwhile, a national coalition of educators and child advocacy groups sent a letter to the video game industry's self-governed ratings board on Tuesday hoping to slap "Manhunt 2" with the strictest rating possible.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board won't say what it was recommending, though Walker said Rockstar already has been told the board was recommending an "Adults Only" rating, meaning the game is suitable only for players 18 years old and older. Walker said the company was considering an appeal for a "Mature" rating, for 17 and older.

In a letter to ESRB President Patricia Vance, the Boston-based Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood urged the stricter, "AO" rating.

No one at the group has seen or played the game, though. Campaign spokesman Josh Golin said the view was based on comments from a video game critic and various studies on video games and violence.

"If ever there was a time for the ESRB's strongest and most unambiguous rating, it is now," wrote Susan Linn, co-founder of the CCFC. "An adults-only rating is the only way to limit children's exposure to this unique combination of horrific violence and interactivity."

The group said the Wii version was particularly troublesome because players would be able to act out the violence with the console's controller.

"It is reasonable to expect that being able to go through the motions of violence while playing Manhunt 2 will exacerbate its negative effects," the letter said. "Given what is already known about the impact of violent games played on standard game controllers, it is irresponsible to make this game available to children and teens on a potentially more dangerous platform."

In a statement, Vance said although it appreciated the CCFC's concerns, the ESRB had already proposed a rating for "Manhunt 2."

Defending the less-restrictive "M" rating, Walker said people shouldn't treat video games like toys.

"Video games are a very sophisticated medium," Walker said. "Ratings systems and classifications boards have to adapt to the audience and the audience has already voted. We keep having the same arguments over and over again."

"Manhunt 2" maker Rockstar and Take-Two have long been at the center of the debate over video game violence and children.

Rockstar was embroiled in another ratings controversy two years ago, after a hacker uncovered a hidden sex scene in "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas." Another of the company's hits, last year's "Bully," was about a slingshot-wielding 15-year-old at Bullworth Academy boarding school, whose motto is "Canis Canem Edit," Latin for "dog eat dog."

                    Father of Sony PlayStation Steps Down

The chief architect of Sony's PlayStation game console stepped down Tuesday as the Japanese company struggles to defend its dominance in the video game industry and revive its reputation as an electronics pioneer.

Ken Kutaragi, 56, retired as Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.'s chairman and group chief executive, the gaming unit said Tuesday. The unit is now headed by Kazuo Hirai, SCE's former president and chief operating officer.

Kutaragi had already been relieved of day-to-day responsibilities as president last year but stayed on as chief executive and chairman. In April, he announced his intention to retire from those positions this month.

Though no longer a board member, Kutaragi will hold an advisory post at the gaming unit, according to SCE official Sayoka Henmi.

The departure of Kutaragi, an icon among gamers, marks the end of an era at Sony Corp. that saw the company dominate the video game industry with its flagship PlayStation consoles.

But it also highlights troubles amid a series of blunders over the rollout of its PlayStation 3 and intense competition from Nintendo Co.'s Wii console and Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360.

Kutaragi's most recent brainchild, the PlayStation 3, has been marred by embarrassing production shortages and a $600 price tag that some fans said was too steep. It went on sale late last year.

Tokyo-based Sony shipped 5.5 million PS3 machines in the fiscal year through March 31, fewer than the 6 million the company had targeted. Nintendo shipped 5.84 million Wii consoles worldwide during the same period.

The PS3's hefty startup costs have weighed heavily on the company's fight to drive up profit in its core electronics division. Sony is not expecting to post a profit in its game business until the fiscal year ending March 2009.

The flop has added to the woes facing the maker of the iconic Walkman, which has ceded its leadership in portable music players to Apple Inc.'s iPod.

A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Government Groups Oppose Permanent Net Tax Ban

The U.S. Congress shouldn't permanently extend a moratorium on taxes
unique to the Internet because the temporary ban keeps Internet providers
from abusing the system, a representative of the National Governors
Association said Thursday.

If Congress makes the ban permanent, which many lawmakers want to do,
nothing would stop Internet providers from trying to expand the number of
banned services, said David Quam, director of federal relations for the
National Governors Association.

"The temporary provision keeps everyone honest," said Quam, speaking at a
Congressional Internet Caucus debate on how long the moratorium should
last.

But there's no evidence that Internet providers have abused the ban by
trying to include voice or video services as part of Internet access
included in the current moratorium, said Broderick Johnson, a spokesman
for the Don't Tax Our Web Coalition.

Johnson and Brian Bieron, senior director of federal affairs at eBay,
both called for Congress to approve a permanent ban on taxes for Internet
access and other taxes unique to the Internet. The current ban, which
expires in November, prohibits states and local governments from levying
"discriminatory" taxes on the Internet, such as taxing the download of a
song more than they tax the sale of music on CDs.

Many U.S. policy makers see broadband adoption as a major way to move the
economy forward, and a permanent ban on Internet taxes would help
broadband grow, Johnson argued.

"To me, it's common sense," he said. "If you make something more expensive
by putting more taxes on it, you're going to depress the ability of people
to access it."

But there's little evidence to suggest Internet access taxes hurt
broadband adoption, Quam countered. When Congress first passed the
Internet tax ban in 1998, it grandfathered in nine states that had already
adopted Internet access taxes, and the broadband adoption in those states
isn't significantly different than in states with no access taxes, he said.

The debate over the tax moratorium has changed since Congress last
extended the ban in 2004. Then, a group of senators, most of them former
state governors, questioned whether the ban should be extended at all,
saying the ban limits states' ability to raise money. This year, two

senators who opposed extending the ban, Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican, and Tom Carper, a Delaware Democrat, have introduced a bill that would narrow the definition of Internet access and extend the ban for four years.

Quam and Jeffrey Arnold, deputy legislative director for the National Association of Counties, both said they support a four-year extension of the ban.

When Congress first passed the ban in 1998, it was trying to protect the fledgling commercial Internet, but such protections are no longer needed, Arnold said. While "no one" wants to tax Internet access, Congress shouldn't permanently interfere in state and local tax decisions, he said.

Part of the objection to a permanent ban is the definition of Internet access that's carried over from the 1998 legislation. That bill banned taxes from access and "other services as part of a package services offered to consumers," and that language may allow Internet providers to include voice, video, or music services in the ban, Quam said.

"We haven't been able to change that troublesome definition, which frankly, is too broad," Quam said.

Bieron from eBay said backers of a permanent ban are willing to change the language, but the other side isn't willing to support a permanent ban.

The moratorium doesn't prohibit states and local governments from collecting sales tax on products sold through the Internet. After a 1992 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, states cannot collect sales tax from remote sales through catalogs and the Internet until they put in place a streamlined sales tax system. So far, not enough states have agreed to adopt a common sales tax system, which is unlikely to happen soon.

Sony's 'Ultimate' PC to Cost $5,000

Expensive PCs were supposed be a thing of the past, but Sony has clearly not heard the news. The company has just announced what must be the most expensive non-gaming PC of the year, the #2,500 (US$5,000) RM1N.

In defense of the RM1N, it is aimed keen amateurs with a need to work with high-definition video, and comes with a top-of-the-range specification to prove it. Featuring the 4-core Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600 processor running at 2.4 GHz at its heart, with 2GB of RAM and the graphics-crunching NVIDIA GeForce 8600 GTS with 256Mb of graphics memory, this machine is no slouch for the money.

As usual for Sony, the system is attractive, clad in acres of dark, sophisticated plastic, precisely the look that appeals to Mac users, and might even pull some of them over to the dark side of the PC. Vista Business is installed as standard, which might not.

The unusual element of the design is the decision to divide the machine into two separate units. The larger box has the motherboard, processor, main memory and graphics, while a smaller unit contains the optical drives, in this case a 50 GB Blu-Ray burner and separate DVD reader/writer.

Presumably, the designers just couldn't fit all the technology into a single unit without making it an annoying hunk of black plastic and metal, but there could also be other considerations at work. The system has 1 terabytes of hard disk space, configured using two SATA drives and through a RAID 0 controller. Getting all this hardware into one box would tax any PC designer.

Off-loading the optical drives - and perhaps eventually the disk drives themselves - into a companion box might be an increasingly necessary trend given the storage demands of today's PCs.

"The VAIO RM1N will exert a unique appeal for those needing serious HD editing capability," said Chris Trewhitt of Sony UK, without explaining how many ordinary PC users might have such a specific need.

"It has quad-core processing power, professional software pre-installed, a specialized Jog controller for speeding up editing, and it has Blu-ray disc. So once you're done you can record 50GB of high-definition video on a single-sided disc. That is an indispensable feature for an HD workstation."

The company stock photograph shows a 19 inch wide-screen monitor, but this is not in fact part of the package. Adobe Premiere Pro 2.0, however, is included in the price. Sony's RM1N will be available from mid-July.

U.S. FTC Warns of Bogus E-mail Containing Spyware

A bogus e-mail message supposedly sent by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission contains spyware and targets corporate and banking executives as well as consumers, the FTC said Monday.

The bogus e-mail poses as an acknowledgment of an FTC complaint filed by the recipient and includes an attachment. E-mail recipients who open the attachment to this e-mail can download malicious spyware onto their computers, the FTC said.

Recipients shouldn't open the e-mail; instead they should delete the message, the FTC advised.

The hoax e-mail is personalized, containing the name of the recipient and their business. The bogus message explains how the complaint will be used and says, "Attached you will find a copy of your complaint. Please print a hard copy of the complaint for your records in the upcoming investigation."

Consumers can learn more about protecting themselves from malicious spyware and bogus e-mail messages at OnGuardOnline.gov, a Web site created by the FTC in partnership with other federal agencies and the technology industry to help consumers stay safe online. The site includes information on spyware and phishing.

Appeals Court Rules for E-mail Privacy

Federal investigators overstepped constitutional bounds by searching stored e-mails without a warrant in a fraud investigation, a federal appeals court ruled Monday.

In a case closely watched by civil-liberties advocates in the still-emerging field of Internet privacy, a three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals found that e-mail users have a reasonable expectation of privacy.

"It goes without saying that like the telephone earlier in our history, e-mail is an ever-increasing mode of private communication, and protecting shared communications through this medium is as important to Fourth Amendment principles today as protecting telephone conversations has been in past," the appeals court said.

Although surveillance of in-transit e-mails is restricted under wiretapping laws, the government had contended that e-mails stored with service providers could be seized without warrants. Monday's ruling counters that position and comes at a time service providers are offering ever-increasing storage space.

"This landmark decision answered a question that had been dangerously open," said Kevin Bankston, attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a civil-liberties group based in San Francisco.

The appeals court's unanimous ruling upholds a lower court ruling temporarily blocking investigators from additional e-mail searches without warrants. The panel said the government would have to either provide an account holder a chance to contest such a seizure or to prove that the holder had no expectation of privacy.

The ruling stems from a fraud investigation against Steven Warshak, owner and president of Berkeley Premium Nutraceuticals, an herbal supplement company known for its "Smiling Bob" ads.

Warshak, whose company markets supplements that include a "natural male enhancement" product called Enzyte, argued that his Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable searches and seizures were violated when the government went after his e-mail records.

The appeals court said the lower court correctly reasoned that e-mails stored at a service provider "were roughly analogous to sealed letters, in which the sender maintains an expectation of privacy. This privacy interest requires that law enforcement officials obtain a warrant, based on a showing of probable cause."

Justice Department spokesman Dean Boyd in Washington said the decision was being reviewed. The government could appeal to the full 6th Circuit or the U.S. Supreme Court.

Warshak has pleaded not guilty to charges that he and his business defrauded customers and banks out of at least $100 million in an alleged scheme that included billing credit cards without authorization.

"I think it's a profoundly important decision applying the Fourth Amendment to electronic privacy rights of citizens," said Warshak's attorney, Martin Weinberg of Boston.

He declined comment on how the ruling could affect the government's fraud case against Warshak.

Government attorneys had contended that the service providers can filter against viruses, spam and pornography, but the appeals court compared those practices to postal workers screening mail for drugs or explosives.

"It's one thing to filter for spam or viruses," said Susan Freiwald, a University of San Francisco law professor who co-wrote a brief filed in support of Warshak. "Those are not the same thing as going in and reading people's e-mails."

US Security Agency Admits Hits By Hackers

Hackers succeeded in penetrating computer systems of the Department of Homeland Security in hundreds of attacks on the lead US cybersecurity agency, a congressional panel disclosed Wednesday.

A lawmaker said at a hearing that documents provided to his subcommittee showed DHS suffered 844 cybersecurity "incidents" in fiscal 2005 and 2006, including some resulting in infection with viruses or other malicious code.

"It was a shock and a disappointment to learn that the Department of Homeland Security - the agency charged with being the lead in our national cybersecurity - has suffered so many significant security problems on its networks," Representative James Langevin told the hearing of the Committee on Homeland Security.

Langevin said documents showed the 844 incidents affected various DHS agencies including Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The incidents including unauthorized access to DHS computers, misconfiguration of firewalls, the compromising of a website, infection with Trojans and viruses and classified data "spillages," the lawmaker said.

"What does this mean? It means terrorists or nation states could be hacking Department of Homeland Security databases, changing or altering names to allow them access to this country, and we wouldn't even know they were doing it," he said.

Scott Charbo, the agency's chief information officer acknowledged in prepared testimony: "Certainly, we need to increase our vigilance to ensure that such incidents do not happen again."

A report by the congressional Government Accountability Office said DHS has made some progress following earlier reviews but that computer security remained inadequate.

"Significant weaknesses in computer security controls threaten the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of key DHS information and information systems," the report said.

Some lawmakers said DHS needs to step up its efforts to promote sound security and protect against what some fear is a "digital Pearl Harbor" in which critical computer systems are attacked.

"How can the Department of Homeland Security be a real advocate for sound cybersecurity practices without following some of its own advice?" Representative Bennie Thompson said.

"How can we expect improvements in private infrastructure cyberdefense when DHS bureaucrats aren't fixing their own configurations?"

Cyber Attack Hits Pentagon

The Defense Department took as many as 1,500 computers off line because of a cyber attack, Pentagon officials said Thursday.

Few details were released about the attack, which happened Wednesday, but Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the computer systems would be working again soon.

Gates said the Pentagon sees hundreds of attacks a day, and this one had no adverse impact on department operations. Employees whose computers were affected could still use their handheld BlackBerries.

During a press briefing Gates said, "We obviously have redundant systems in place. ... There will be some administrative disruptions and personal inconveniences."

He said the Pentagon shut the computers down when a penetration of the system was detected, and the cause is still being investigated.

When asked if his own e-mail account was affected, Gates revealed, "I don't do e-mail. I'm a very low-tech person."

Court Mandates Warrant for E-Mail Search

In a landmark ruling that has privacy advocates standing in applause, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decided that the government must have a search warrant before it can secretly seize and search e-mails stored by ISPs.

In Monday's unanimous ruling, the court found that e-mail users have the same reasonable expectation of privacy in their stored e-mail as they do in their telephone calls. The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is the first circuit court ever to make that finding.

Over the past 20 years, the government has routinely used the federal Stored Communications Act (SCA) to obtain stored e-mail from ISPs without a warrant. But this week's ruling found that the SCA violates the Fourth Amendment.

"We have little difficulty agreeing with the district court that individuals maintain a reasonable expectation of privacy in e-mails that are stored with, or sent or received through, a commercial Internet service provider," the court ruled. "The content of e-mail is something that the user 'seeks to preserve as private,' and therefore 'may be constitutionally protected.'"

The court continued: "It goes without saying that like the telephone earlier in our history, e-mail is an ever-increasing mode of private communication, and protecting shared communications through this medium is as important to Fourth Amendment principles today as protecting telephone conversations has been in the past."

Steven Warshak brought the case against the United States in the Southern District of Ohio federal court to stop the government's repeated secret searches and seizures of his stored e-mail using the SCA. The district court ruled that the government cannot use the SCA to obtain stored e-mail without a warrant or prior notice to the e-mail account holder, but the government appealed that ruling to the 6th Circuit.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation served as an amicus in the case, joined by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Democracy & Technology. Law professors Susan Freiwald and Patricia Bellia also submitted an amicus brief, and the case was successfully argued at the 6th Circuit by Warshak's counsel Martin Weinberg.

"E-mail users expect that their Hotmail and Gmail inboxes are just as private as their postal mail and their telephone calls," Electronic Frontier Foundation Staff Attorney Kevin Bankston said in a statement. "The government tried to get around this common sense conclusion, but the Constitution applies online as well as offline, as the court correctly found. That means that the government can't secretly seize your e-mails without a warrant."

Marc Rotenberg, president of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, agreed with Bankston. He called it a "good decision" that helps clarify an area of the law that has confused many court magistrates faced with applying the Fourth Amendment standards to stored e-mail.

"As the ruling currently stands, it's one of the most significant decisions in several years concerning privacy because it came down from the federal appeals court," Rotenberg said. "This ruling impacts not only e-mail companies but also many others. So we'll certainly be interested to see what happens."

U.S. General Laments Google Earth Capability

The head of U.S. Air Force intelligence and surveillance on Thursday said data available commercially through online mapping software such as Google Earth posed a danger to security but could not be rolled back.

"To talk about danger is, if I may, really is irrelevant because it's there," said Lt. Gen. David Deptula, deputy chief of staff for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

"No one's going to undo commercial satellite imagery," he told reporters in Washington.

Deptula cited Google Inc.'s Google Earth, which gives Web users an astronaut's view of the earth and allows them to zoom down to street level. He said it had provided anyone with a credit card the ability to get a picture of any place on earth.

"It is huge," he said. "It's something that was a closely guarded secret

not that long ago and now everybody's got access to it."

Asked if the U.S. military might try to implement restrictions or blackouts on imagery of some areas, Deptula said he was not aware of such an attempt.

"I don't want to speak to specifics, but not that I'm aware of," he said.

Instead, governments are trying to mitigate the effect through camouflage, concealment and deception, he said, providing no other details.

'Blog', 'Cookie', 'Wiki' Top List of Hated Internet Words

"Blog", "netiquette", "cookie" and "wiki" have been voted among the most irritating words spawned by the Internet, according to the results of a poll published Thursday.

Topping the list of words most likely to make web users "wince, shudder or want to bang your head on the keyboard" was folksonomy, a term for a web classification system.

"Blogosphere", the collective name for blogs or online journals, was second; "blog" itself was third; "netiquette", or Internet etiquette, came fourth and "blook", a book based on a blog, was fifth.

"Cookie", a file sent to a user's computer after they visit a website, came in ninth, while "wiki", a collaborative website edited by its readers, was tenth.

British pollsters YouGov questioned 2,091 adults earlier this month for the poll commissioned by the Lulu Blooker Prize, a literary award for books, which released the results in a statement.

Earlier this month, the growing use of words inspired by cyberspace was highlighted when the Collins English Dictionary announced that a string of them would be included in their ninth edition.

These included "me-media", a term for personal content websites such as Facebook, and "godcast", a religious service which has been converted to an MP3 format.

The dictionary's compilers monitor the use of English through a 2.5 billion word database of websites, magazines, books, journals, newspapers and broadcast transcripts to help them decide if new words should be included.

Image Attachments for Spam Decline

A common spamming technique of sending unwanted e-mail pitches as image attachments rather than text is on the decline, as spammers continue adapting their methods for sneaking past e-mail filters.

This week, security company McAfee Inc. revised its top 10 predictions

for the year to account for the reversal. Another company, IronPort Systems Inc., said image spam now accounts for about 20 percent of all spam, down from 33 percent two months ago.

"It's been two years since image spam has burst onto the scene. Anti-spam technologies are starting to react to that," said David Mayer, a product manager at IronPort. "We've seen other techniques and technologies rise up to make up" for the decline.

He said spammers are now placing those images on free photo-sharing sites, the ones people use to send vacation photos to friends and family, and embedding links to those images in their junk messages. These are difficult for spam filters to block because the same sites are used for legitimate photos as well.

And on Wednesday, IronPort said it saw the first spam attack using PDF attachments, showing spammers' increased sophistication and willingness to diversify their portfolio.

Images are popular among spammers because filters have no easy way of knowing whether a graphical file contains an innocent photograph of a friend's birthday party or embedded text pitching Viagra or a company's stock.

Filters initially applied a mathematical formula to known spam images, generating a unique signature that software can use to flag junk. But then spammers circulated tools to automatically vary images ever so slightly, a change in color here, a slightly larger border there, changing the signature and helping spam escape detection.

But filters have now gotten better at scanning the contents of the attachments, leading spammers to link instead to images elsewhere. Within weeks, Mayer said, use of that technique rose from almost nothing to about 5 percent of all spam.

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